

The AKP's Turkey: More Civilian, But More Democratic?

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Articles & Testimony

Not a day goes by without another pundit lauding Turkey's democratization by the ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP. The argument is that Turkey has finally become a true democracy under the AKP, as the party has boldly forced the military into its barracks and empowered the masses over the secular elites.

Since the AKP came to power in 2002, Turkish politics has become civilianized. The military, once a kingmaker in Ankara, is now firmly on the sidelines -- the AKP, relentless in its pursuit of Ergenekon coup allegations, has at last ensured that the military is fully subject to its authority. Many have also suggested that the outcome of the Sept. 12 constitutional referendum, which gave the AKP the right to appoint a majority of the judges to Turkey's high court without a confirmation process, is another step towards Turkey's democratization. Wishful thinking aside, Turkey's civilianization has not necessarily made it a more liberal democratic polity.

A liberal democracy is marked by two essential traits: popular sovereignty as manifested by regular and transparent elections -- the democratic condition -- and the unconditional and equal protection of certain political, legal, and economic rights -- the liberal condition. A country can, for instance, satisfy both of the conditions (the United States), the democratic condition but not the liberal condition (Putin's Russia), the liberal condition but not the democratic condition (Britain, circa the early 19th century), or neither condition (North Korea).

The implementation of the will of the majority is desirable as a purely democratic end, but not when it is deprived of liberal rights. Indeed, when most people extol the virtues of "democracy," it is usually the guaranteed framework of freedoms to which they are referring. Simply framing Turkey within the rhetoric of "elites versus the people" and "democratization" thus skirts the issue of whether the liberal condition of liberal democracy is truly being met.

Indices published on a variety of issues, ranging from media and Internet freedoms to gender equality, demonstrate that the rate of liberalization in Turkey has not kept up with its increased democratization. Although there was marked improvement in such indicators up until 2005 -- the year when negotiations for EU accession began and almost simultaneously stalled -- there has been notable stagnation and deterioration since then. According to the World Economic Forum, Turkey dropped from 105th place out of 128 countries in 2006 to 121st place just one year later on an index measuring gender equality. Similar downturns were recorded on Freedom House indices measuring media freedom. Evidently, more democracy does not, in and of itself, lead to a freer, liberal democracy.

AKP leader and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's comments implicitly threatening secular businesses with "elimination" should they refuse to take a stand on the recent constitutional referendum illuminate this last point well. So do his recent statements, labeling those critical of the new constitutional package (42 percent of the Sept. 12 referendum voters) as "coup supporters" -- a significant charge considering the AKP is actively prosecuting alleged "coup plotters."

Next, suggesting that the AKP is spearheading a transition from a long-reigning exclusive and secularist "elite" to a newly liberated, pro-democracy, religious mass is blatantly false. Indeed, the once accurate interchangeability of the

terms "elite," "secular," and "Kemalist" -- a reflection of the realities of the early Turkish republic -- has long expired. Today, Turkish secularists are not necessarily elites and Turkish elites are not necessarily secularist.

For instance, those who espouse secularism no longer represent a tiny fragment of the Turkish population. Studies show that a plurality of Turks support institutions and values traditionally perceived to be the refuge of secular elites, such as the military and the rejection of shariah law.

More importantly, Turkish elites are no longer confined to those who are avowedly secular. Take a closer look at the major players in Turkey's recent economic expansion, for example: They come from conservative and religious backgrounds, were barely profitable before the AKP came to power, yet now fly with the AKP leaders to broker free trade deals in faraway lands and post revenues amounting to billions of dollars.

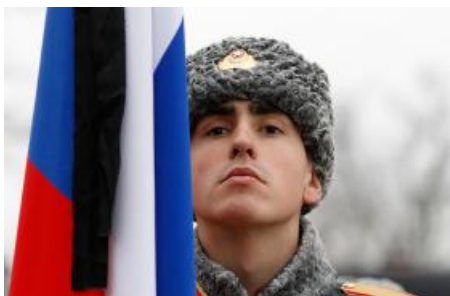
What is more, the AKP, with its roots in the Islamist Welfare Party, represents the culmination of a new Islamist political and cultural elite. Today, Turkey has Islamist billionaires, as well as Islamist media, think tanks, universities, TV networks, pundits and scholars -- in other words, it has a full-fledged Islamist elite. Furthermore, individuals financially and ideologically associated with the AKP now hold prominent posts in universities, state-run media and major state-owned businesses, such as Turkish Airlines.

Now, reexamine the much-praised, allegedly pro-democracy constitutional reform package. Sure, it pays legalese lip service to democratic norms like gender equality -- somewhat ironic considering that the number of women in executive positions in government has decreased under the AKP. However, its only substantive reform will be to increase the number of judges sitting in the Constitutional Court and expand the AKP's control over their appointments. This will enable the AKP to expand its already extensive network of strategically placed elites into the highest echelons of the judicial branch -- did someone say democratization?

Look closely and you will find that the Islamists are Turkey's elites and, alas, the country is not becoming a better liberal democracy under their tutelage. ❖

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